

STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONS OF IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND STUDENTS: INSIGHTS FROM SLOVENIA AND CROATIA

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Abstract

Student-teacher relationships play a critical role in supporting students' academic success and psychological well-being. However, perceptions of these relationships can vary, with students from immigrant backgrounds often at risk for less positive interactions compared to their native peers. Challenges such as language acquisition and cultural adjustment may contribute to these challenges (Ialuna et al., 2024). Positive student-teacher relationships can serve as a key mechanism for immigrant students to adapt to their school environment, fostering inclusion, social engagement, and a sense of school belonging. The ICCS 2022 study provides a valuable framework for exploring the dynamics of student-teacher relationships, particularly through variables related to civic and citizenship education. This paper investigates how predictors such as openness in classroom discussions, influence on school decision-making, and participation in civic activities are associated with student-teacher relationships among students with an immigrant background in Slovenia and Croatia. The study utilizes representative data from the ICCS 2022 cycle of which 21 % of students from Slovenia and 6 % from Croatia reported to have an immigrant background. Descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients, and linear regression models were calculated using RALSA (Mirazchiyski, 2021). The findings reveal both commonalities and differences in the factors predicting student-teacher relationships among immigrant students across the two neighboring countries. Findings are discussed through the view of democratic school and classroom culture with considerations of practical implications.

Keywords: *Student-teacher relations, immigrant background, students, ICCS 2022.*

1. Introduction

Student-teacher relationships are central to students' educational success, impacting academic performance, engagement, and motivation (Zheng, 2022). However, as students represent a heterogeneous group, these relationships are not uniform for all students. In the contemporary context of increased immigration, students with an immigrant background present a unique opportunity to study variations in student-teacher relationships. Given that immigration introduces cultural and linguistic differences, these students may develop distinct relationships with their teachers compared to their native peers.

Positive student-teacher relationships serve as a protective factor for the well-being of immigrant-background students, fostering social development (Peguero & Bondy, 2011), school belonging (Štremfel et al., 2024), and adaptation to new educational environments (Archambault et al., 2024). From this perspective, schools play a vital role in supporting the successful integration of immigrant-background students into diverse societies.

In this study, we define immigrant-background students as those who were either born abroad or have at least one parent born outside the country of schooling, consistent with the definition used in the IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2022 (ICCS 2022). According to ICCS 2022 data, approximately 21% of 8th-grade students in Slovenia reported having an immigrant background, with historical migration trends mainly stemming from Yugoslavian countries and, more recently, from Ukraine. In contrast, only 6% of students in Croatia reported having an immigrant background according to data from ICCS 2022. Given these demographic differences, our study aims to identify similarities and differences in the predictors of student-teacher relationships in these two neighboring countries.

ICCS 2022 provides a framework for examining student-teacher relationships within the broader context of civic and citizenship education. As relationships between students and teachers form within classrooms and schools, they reflect the values, norms, and practices that constitute a democratic school culture (Yavuz Tabak & Karip, 2022). Schools promote democratic culture through civic and citizenship education, fostering students' development into active democratic participants (Tzankova et al., 2021).

While various factors shape student-teacher relationships, there is a research gap concerning how democratic school and classroom culture impact these relationships, particularly for immigrant-background students. Since democratic school culture is reflected in opportunities for open discussion and student participation in decision-making processes (Tzankova et al., 2021), these variables may also contribute to immigrant students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships.

Based on this, we pose the following research question: How are factors related to democratic school and classroom culture associated with students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships in Slovenia and Croatia? Specifically, we aim to identify similarities and differences in the predictors of student-teacher relationships for immigrant-background students in these two countries.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In Slovenia, the ICCS 2022 sample consisted of 4958 (50.12 % male; 21 % of students reported to having an immigrant background. The sample for Croatia consisted of 2776 students (52.09 % female; 6 % of students reported to being of an immigrant background).

2.2. Instruments

Variables from the international ICCS 2022 database were used in the present analyses. All variables are taken from the ICCS 2022 student-background questionnaire. Students' perceptions of student-teacher relations at school (S_STUTREL) was the main variable of interest and taken as an indicator of student-teacher relationships. Other variables from the international database included perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC), perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT), reports about civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN), beliefs about student influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC), student participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART) and student gender (S_GENDER). Lastly, a dichotomous index was derived to describe students' background (native and immigrant) and to perform analyses for immigrant background students.

2.3. Procedure

Participants are from the student sample of the ICCS 2022 study. The data was collected during the main ICCS 2022 field trial. All analyzed data is available openly from the ICCS 2022 website. Data analysis was conducted in RALSA (Mirazchiyski, 2021), a statistical package for R.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables are presented in Table 1. The correlation coefficients for immigrant students in Slovenia are shown below the diagonal, while the correlation coefficients for immigrant-background students in Croatia are displayed above the diagonal.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	S_STUTREL	47.02	10.77	49.48	10.05	1.00	0.45	0.50	0.39	0.09	0.51	0.12
2	S_OPDISC	45.88	11.76	49.82	11.18	0.19	1.00	0.26	0.45	0.19	0.40	0.28
3	S_INTACT	46.17	10.78	47.34	10.72	0.63	0.15	1.00	0.26	0.12	0.36	-
4	S_CIVLRN	51.17	12.47	45.23	10.31	0.26	0.29	0.23	1.00	0.22	0.50	0.02
5	S_SCHPART	48.51	11.02	49.58	8.03	0.01	0.20	0.06	0.14	1.00	0.13	0.16
6	S_INFDEC	49.26	10.40	47.70	9.14	0.59	0.18	0.53	0.32	0.11	1.00	0.22
7	SD_GENDER	1.47	0.50	1.52	0.50	0.02	0.27	-0.03	0.07	0.06	-0.03	1.00

Notes: Means and standard deviations for Slovenia are in the first two column followed by means and standard deviations for Croatia.

** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$.

Two linear regression models were conducted to examine the predictors of student-teacher relationships among students with an immigrant background in Slovenia and Croatia. In both models, gender was included as a control variable, while all continuous predictors were entered simultaneously.

The model for Slovenia accounted for 49% of the variance in students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Students' beliefs about the influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC; $\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$) and student interaction at school (S_INTACT; $\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.05$) were significant positive predictors, whereas student participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART; $\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$) emerged as a negative predictor. In Croatia, the model explained 41% of the variance, with S_INFDEC ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$), S_INTACT ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.05$), and openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC; $\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$) all serving as positive predictors. No other variables demonstrated significant predictive power in either model.

4. Conclusions

The present study examined the influence of civic and citizenship education variables on student-teacher relationships among immigrant-background students in Slovenia and Croatia. The findings indicate both similarities and differences in the predictors across the two countries. Students' perceived influence on decision-making at school emerged as a significant predictor in both contexts, highlighting the role of democratic school and classroom culture in shaping positive student-teacher relationships (Tzankova et al., 2021). It is likely that teachers who encourage student participation in decision-making processes are perceived as more supportive, thereby strengthening student-teacher relationships. Additionally, student interaction at school was a significant positive predictor, emphasizing the role of peer relationships in fostering positive student-teacher interactions, consistent with prior research (Kiuru et al., 2015). However, country-specific differences were observed. Openness in classroom discussions was a significant predictor only in Croatia, while participation in civic activities was a significant predictor only in Slovenia, suggesting that contextual factors may shape the mechanisms through which democratic school culture is associated with students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. These findings reinforce the importance of both democratic school practices and peer interactions in promoting positive relationships between immigrant-background students and their teachers.

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